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TRUXTON KING

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CHAPTER XVII.

TRUXTON EXACTS A PROMISE.
TRUXTON KING had been in a resentful frame of mind for nearly forty-eight hours. In the first place, he had not had so much as a single glimpse of the girl he now worshiped with all his heart. In the second place, he had learned, with unpleasant promptness, that Count Vos Engo was the officer in command of the house guard, a position as gravely responsible as it was honorable.

He had, of course, proffered his services to Colonel Quinnox. The colonel, who admired the Americans, gravely informed him that there was no regular duty to which he could be assigned, but that he would expect him to hold himself ready for any emergency. In case of an assault he was to report to Count Vos Engo.

But he was not satisfied. Loraine had not come forward with a word of greeting or relief—in fact, she had not appeared outside the castle doors. Toward dusk on Monday, long after the arrival of the refugees, he sat in gloomy contemplation of his own unhappiness, darkly glowering upon the unfriendly portals from a distant stone bench.

A brisk guardsman separated himself from the knot of men at the castle doors and crossed the plaza toward him.

Judge the dismay and anger when the soldier, a bit shamefaced himself, briefly announced that Count Vos Engo had issued an order against loitering in close proximity to the castle.

Truxton's cheek burned. He saw in an instant that the order was meant for him and for no one else, he being the only outsider likely to come under the head of "loiterer."

Truxton turned to him with a frank smile. "Please tell Count Vos Engo that I am the last person in the world to disregard discipline at a time like this."

His glance swept the balcony, suddenly becoming fixed on a couple near the third column. Count Vos Engo and Loraine Tullis were standing there together, unmistakably watching his humiliating departure.

The next morning he encountered Vos Engo near the grotto.

Catching sight of Vos Engo, he hastened across the avenue and caught up to him.

"Good morning," said Truxton. Vos Engo did not smile as he eyed the tall American. "I haven't had a chance to thank you for coming back for me last Saturday. Allow me to say that it was a very brave thing to do."

"I do not like your words, Mr. King, nor the way in which you glare at me."

"I'm making it easier to tell you the agreeable news, Count Vos Engo; that's all. Take your hand off your sword, please—some other time perhaps, but not in these days, when we need men, not cripples. I'll tell you what I have discovered, and then we'll drop the matter until some other time. Frankly, count, I have made the gratifying discovery that you are a miserable cur."

Count Vos Engo went very white. "As you say, there is another and a better time. We need dogs as well as men in these days."

Truxton strolled off to the stables, picking up Mr. Hobbs on the way.

"Hobbs," he said, "we've got to find John Tullis; that's all there is to it." "I dare say, sir," said Mr. Hobbs, with sprightly decisiveness. "He's very much needed."

"I'm going to need him before long as my second."

Later on much of Truxton's good humor was restored and his vanity pleased by a polite request from Count Halfont to attend an important council in the "room of wrangles" that evening at 9.

Very boldly he advanced upon the castle a few minutes before the appointed hour.

He came upon Loraine Tullis at the edge of the terrace. She was walking slowly in the soft shadows beyond the row of lights on the lower gallery. He knew her at a glance, this slim girl in spotless white.

"Loraine!" he whispered, reaching her side in two bounds. She put out her hands, and he clasped them. Plainly she was confused. "I've been dying for a glimpse of you. Do you think you've treated me?"

"Don't, Truxton!" she pleaded, suddenly serious. "You must not come here. I saw—well, you know. I was so ashamed; I was so sorry."

He still held her hands. "Yes; they ordered me to move on, as if I were a common loafer," he said, with a soft chuckle. "But where have you kept yourself?"

"I have been ill, Truxton—truly, I have," she said quickly, uneasily. "You told Vos Engo to ride back and pick me up," he persisted. "He told

me in so many words. Now, I want a plain answer, Loraine. Did you promise to reward him if he—well, if he saved me from the mob?"

"No," she said in a low voice. "What was it, then? I must know, Loraine."

"I am very, oh, so very unhappy, Truxton," she murmured. "I came near spoiling everything just now," he whispered hoarsely.

"What?" "I almost kissed you, Loraine. I swear it was hard to keep from it. That would have spoiled everything."

"Yes, it would," she agreed quickly. "I'm not going to kiss you until you have told me you love Vos Engo."

"I—I don't understand!" she cried, drawing back and looking up into his face with bewildered eyes.

"Because then I'll be sure that you love me."

"Be sensible, Truxton."

"I'll know that you promised to love him if he'd save me. It's as clear as day to me. You did tell him you'd marry him if he got me to a place of safety."

"No. I refused to marry him if he did not save you. Oh, Truxton, I am so miserable! What is to become of all of us? What is to become of John and Bobby and you?"

"I—I think I'll kiss you now, Loraine," he whispered almost tremulously. "God, how I love you, little darling! You must make me a promise."

"Oh, Truxton, don't ask me to say that I'll be your—"

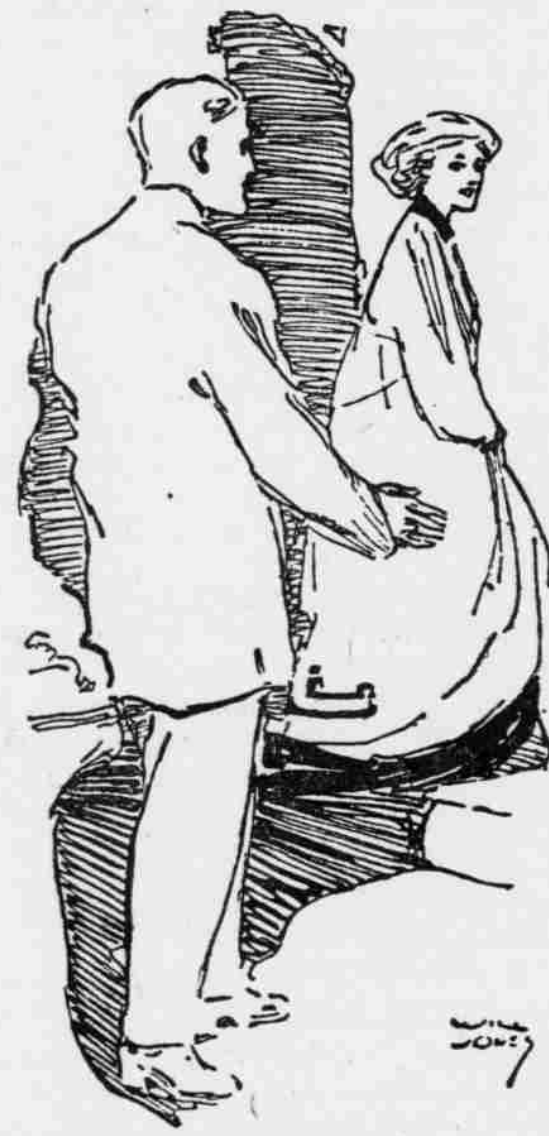
"That will come later," he said consolingly. "I want you to promise, on your sacred word of honor, that you'll kiss me now until you've kissed me."

"Oh," she murmured, "I—I cannot promise that! I am not sure that I'll ever—ever kiss anybody. What is it you really want me to say?"

She asked, looking up with sudden shyness in her starry eyes.

"That you love me—and me only, Loraine," he whispered.

"I will not say it," she cried, breaking away from him. "But," as she



"THAT YOU LOVE ME AND ME ONLY, LO-RAINE."

ran to the steps, a delicious tremor in her voice, "I will consider the other thing you ask."

King was ushered into a large, sedately furnished room. A score of men were there before him—sitting or standing in attitudes of attention, listening to the words of General Braze.

King's entrance was the signal for an immediate transfer of interest. The general bowed most politely and at once turned to Count Halfont with the remark that he had quite finished his suggestions. The prime minister came forward to greet the momentarily shy American.

"The council has been extolling you, Mr. King," said the prime minister, leading him to a seat near his own.

Truxton blushed. Involuntarily he glanced at Vos Engo. That gentleman started, a curious light leaping into his eyes.

"Here's the situation in a nutshell," went on the prime minister. "We are doomed unless succor reaches us from the outside. We seem unable to warn John Tullis, who, if given time, might succeed in collecting a sufficient force of loyal countrymen to harass and eventually overthrow the dictator. I am loath to speak of another alternative that has been discussed at length by the ministers and their friends. The Duke of Perse, from a bed of pain and anguish, has counseled us to take steps in the direction I am about to speak of."

"We can appeal to Russia in this hour of stress, but we will have to make an unpleasant sacrifice. Russia is eager to take over our new issue of railway bonds. Hitherto we have voted against disposing of the bonds in this country, the reason being obvious. St. Petersburg wants a new connecting line with her possessions in Afghanistan. Our line will provide a most direct route—a cutoff, I believe they call it. Last year the Grand Duke Paulus volunteered to provide the money for the construction of the line from Edelweiss north to Balak on condition that Russia be given the right to use the line in connection with her own roads to the orient. You may see the advantage in this to Russia. Mr. King, if I send word to the Grand Duke Paulus, agreeing to his terms, which still remain open to us, signing away a most valuable right in what we had hoped would be our own individual property, we have every reason to believe that he will send armed forces

to our relief on the pretext that Russia is defending properties of her own. That is one way in which we may oust Count Marlanx. The other lies in the ability of John Tullis to give battle to him with our own people carrying the guns. Lieutenant Haddan has told us quite lately of a remark you made which he happened to overhear. If I quote him correctly, you said to the Englishman Hobbs that you could get away with it, meaning, as I take it, that you could succeed in reaching John Tullis. May I not implore you to tell us how you would go about it?"

Truxton had turned a brick red. Shame and mortification surged within him. He was cruelly conscious of an undercurrent of irony in the premier's courteous request. For an instant he was sorely crushed. A low laugh from the opposite side of the room sent a shaft to his soul. He looked up. Vos Engo was still smiling. In an instant the American's blood boiled.

"I did say I could get to John Tullis. I'll start tonight."

His words created a profound impression, they came so abruptly. "Send for Mr. Hobbs, please," said Truxton. "There should be three of us," addressing the men about him. "One of us is sure to get away."

"There is not a man here—or in the service—who will not gladly accompany you, Mr. King," cried General Braze quickly.

"Count Vos Engo is the man I would choose, if I may be permitted the honor of naming my companion," said Truxton, grinning inwardly with a malicious joy. Vos Engo turned a yellowish green. His eyes bulged.

"I—I am in command of the person of his royal highness," he stammered, suddenly going very red.

"I had forgotten your present occupation," said Truxton quietly. "Pray pardon the embarrassment I may have caused you. After all, I think Hobbs will do. He knows the country like a book."

Mr. Hobbs came. That is to say, he was produced. It is doubtful if Mr. Hobbs ever fully recovered from the malady commonly known as stage fright. He had never been called Mr. Hobbs by a prime minister before, nor had he ever been asked in person by a minister of war if he had a family at home. Afterward Truxton King was obliged to tell him that he had unwaveringly volunteered to accompany him on the perilous trip to the hills. Be sure of it, Mr. Hobbs was not in a mental condition for many hours to even remotely comprehend what had taken place.

But Mr. Hobbs was not the kind to falter once he had given his word.

"We'll be off at midnight, Hobbs," said Truxton.

"As you say, Mr. King, just as you say," said Hobbs, with fine indifference.

As Truxton was leaving the castle ten minutes later a brisk, eager faced young attendant hurried up to him.

"I bear a message from his royal highness," said the attendant, detaining him. "Prince Robin has asked for you, sir."

"I'll see him," said King promptly, as if he were granting the audience.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BY THE WATER GATE.

IT was a vast, lofty apartment, regal in its subdued lights. An enormous golden bed with gorgeous hangings stood far down the room. So huge was this royal couch that Truxton at first overlooked the figure sitting bolt upright in the middle of it.

An old woman advanced from the head of the couch and motioned Truxton to approach.

"I am deeply honored, your highness," said the visitor, bowing very low.

The prince's legs were now hanging over the edge of the bed. His eyes were dancing with excitement.

"I want you to find Uncle Jack, Mr. King," said Bobby eagerly. "And tell him I didn't mean it when I banished him the other day. I really and truly didn't." He was having difficulty in keeping back the tears.

"I shall deliver the message, your highness," said Truxton, his heart going out to the unhappy youngster.

"Americans always do what they will," said the boy, his eyes snapping.

"Here's something for you to take with you, Mr. King. It's my lucky stone. It always gives good luck."

He unclasped his small fingers. In the damp palm lay one of those peculiarly milky, half transparent pebbles common the world over and of value only to small, impressionable boys. Truxton accepted it with profound gravity.

"And when you come back, Mr. King, I'm going to knight you. I'd do it now, only Aunt Loraine says you'd be worrying about your title all the time and might be 'strayed from your mission. I'm going to make a baron of you. That's higher than a count in Graustark. Vos Engo is only a count."

Truxton started. "I shall be overwhelmed," he said. Then his hand went to his mouth in the vain effort to cover the smile that played there.

"My mother used to say—'I can girls liked titles,' said she with ingenuous candor.

"Prince Robin, may I?"—he glanced, uneasily at the distant nurse—"may I

ask how your Aunt Loraine is feeling?"

"She acted very funny when I sent for you. I'm worried about her."

"What did she do, your highness?"

"She rushed off to her room. I think, Mr. King, she was getting ready to cry or something. You see, she's in trouble."

"She's worried about her brother, of course, and you."

"I just wish I could tell you—No, I won't. It wouldn't be fair," Bobby said, checking himself resolutely. "She's awful proud of you. I'm sure she likes you, Mr. King."

"I'm very, very glad to hear that." Truxton bent his knee. "Your highness, as it seems I am not to see her and as you seem to be the very best friend I have, I should very much like to ask a great favor of you. Will you take this old ring of mine and wish it on her finger just as soon as I have left your presence?"

"How did you know she was coming in again?" in wide eyed wonder.

"Excuse me. I shouldn't ask questions. What shall I wish?" It was the old ring that had come from Spantz's shop. The prince promptly hid it beneath the pillow.

"I'll leave that to you, my best of friends."

"I bet it'll be a good wish, all right. I know what to wish."

"Then, goodbye and God bless you," said Truxton. "I must be off. Your Uncle Jack is waiting for me up there in the hills."

Truxton found Mr. Hobbs in a state bordering on collapse with Colonel Quinnox and Haddan.

"I say, Mr. King, there's no more chance of getting out of the—"

"Listen, Hobbs, we're going to swim out," said Truxton.

"Swim! Oh, I say! By hokey, he's gone clean daffy!" Hobbs was eying him with alarm.

"Not yet, Hobbs. Later on, perhaps. I had occasion to make a short tour of investigation this afternoon. Doubtless, gentlemen, you know where the water gate is, back of the castle. Hobbs, you and I will sneak under that slippery old gate like a couple of eels. I forgot to ask if you can swim."

"To be sure I can. Under the gate! My word!"

"I see!" cried Quinnox. "It can be done! No one will be watching at that point."

The sky was overcast, the night as black as ebony. The four men left the officers' quarters at 1 o'clock, making their way to the historic old gate in the glen below the castle.

"God be with you," said Quinnox fervently. The four men shook hands, and King slipped into the water without a moment's hesitation.

"Right after me, Hobbs," he said, and then his head went under.

A minute later he and Hobbs were on the outside of the gate, gasping for breath. Standing in water to their necks, Quinnox and Haddan passed the equipment through the barred openings. There were whispered good-bys and then two invisible heads bobbed off in the night, wading in the swift flowing canal up to their chins. Swimming would have been dangerous on account of the noise.

Holding their belongings high above their heads, with their hearts in their mouths, King and the Englishman felt their way carefully along the bed of the stream.

A hundred yards from the gate they crawled ashore and made their way up over the steep bank into the thick, wild underbrush.

They stealthily stripped themselves of the wet garments and after no end of trouble succeeded in getting into the dry substitutes. Then they lowered the wet bundles into the water and quietly stole off through the brush to the king's highway, a mile or two above town.

"We take this path here for the upper road," finally said Hobbs. "It's a good two hours' walk up the mountain to Rabot's, where we get the horses."

At 4 o'clock, as the sun reached up with his long red fingers from behind the Monastery mountain, Truxton King and Hobbs rode away from Rabot's cottage high in the hills, refreshed and sound of heart. Rabot's son rode with them, a sturdy, loyal lad, who had leaped joyously at the chance to serve his prince.

Now let us turn to John Tullis and his quest in the hills. It goes without saying that he found no trace of his sister or her abductors. On the fifth day a large force of Dawsbergen soldiers, led by Prince Dantan himself, found the fagged, dispirited American and his half starved men encamped in a rocky defile in the heart of the wilderness.

That same night a Graustark mountaineer passed the sentinels and brought news of the disturbance in Edelweiss.

In a flash it occurred to John Tullis that Marlanx was at the bottom of this deviltry. The abduction of Loraine was a part of his plan! Prince Dantan advised a speedy return to the city. His men were at the command of the American. Moreover, the prince himself decided to accompany the troops.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

COMPASSION.

A tender hearted and compassionate disposition, which inclines men to pity and feel the misfortunes of others and which is even for its own sake incapable of involving any man in ruin and misery, is of all tempers of mind the most amiable and, though it seldom receives much honor, is worthy of the highest.—Fielding.